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Fasting in Islam and Other Religions: Alchemical and Therapeutic Implications in Socio-Spiritual Treatments

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Abstract

Fasting is a prominent practice across various religious traditions, serving in both spiritual and ideological functions. In Islam, fasting during Ramadan enhances self-discipline, empathy, and spiritual connection with God by abstinence from food and beverages, while also aligning with scientific research on the health benefits of intermittent fasting. Other religions adopt diverse fasting practices, including dietary restrictions, silence, and abstinence from sexual activity, to achieve spiritual purification and discipline. Philosophically, fasting is viewed as a means of self-restoration and balance, with Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali emphasizing its role in cleansing the soul and promoting virtues. In psychotherapy, abstinence from harmful substances or behaviors is pivotal for treating addiction and compulsive disorders. Techniques such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Motivational Interviewing support individuals in building healthier coping mechanisms and achieving lasting recovery. To implement cultural discipline and also means for alchemical purification for social-cultural disorders, the fasting has not to be limited to prevention from food and beverages, but also to be promoted as customized practice of abstinence from excessive use of any practice or substances. The concept of bid'ah (innovation) highlights the challenges of integrating new interpretations of fasting within religious frameworks, underscoring the tension between doctrinal purity and contemporary adaptation. This dynamic is reflected across various traditions, illustrating the ongoing negotiation between maintaining and embracing reform.

Keywords: Fasting, Bid'ah, Islam, Social-Cultural disorders

Introduction

Fasting, a practice common across various religious traditions, serves not only as a ritualistic obligation but it may also imply as a profound therapeutic practice if the Philosophy and comprehensive reforms are implemented in such practice as an alchemical approach to return balance to social, psychological and cultural disorders (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024). Such reforms are considered harsh surgery in the body of society and that is exactly the discourse of reforms in the religion which is contradicted by Sunnah and religious leaders. During the course of Gaza conflicts, we have counted severe divergence between religion, Wisdom and contemporary science which has revealed the necessity to find interconnectedness and to consider systematic changes to each context, in order to return balance to the social lives (Davoudpour, A.R.,, 2024).

In Islam, fasting is primarily observed during the holy month of Ramadan, where individuals refrain from eating and drinking from dawn until dusk. Other religions, however, have diverse forms of fasting, including silence fasting and abstinence from marriage and sexual relations. This article explores the philosophical underpinnings and healing properties of fasting in Islam and other religious traditions, highlighting how fasting serves both a spiritual and therapeutic purpose.

Fasting in Islam

In Islam, fasting (known as *Sawm*) is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and is primarily observed during the month of Ramadan, a lunar month in the Islamic calendar. Muslims are required to abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs from dawn (*fajr*) until sunset (*maghrib*). The primary purpose of this form of fasting is to cultivate self-control, empathy towards the less fortunate, and to strengthen one's relationship with God. According to Islamic tradition, fasting purifies the soul and body, helping to control desires and inclinations that deviate from righteous behavior (Al-Tabari, 1992).

The Quranic verse that mandates fasting states, "O you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may become righteous" (Quran, 2:183). This highlights the spiritual objective of fasting, which is to achieve *taqwa* (piety or righteousness). However, fasting in Islam also has therapeutic benefits. By abstaining from food and drink, the digestive system is given a break, allowing the body to detoxify. This aligns with modern scientific findings on intermittent fasting, which have shown improvements in metabolic health and cognitive function (Mattson et al., 2017).

Fasting in Other Religions

Other religious traditions have different forms of fasting, each with unique purposes and meanings. For instance, in Hinduism and Jainism, fasting often involves abstaining from certain types of food, or fasting on specific days to achieve spiritual clarity and discipline (Rastogi, 2016). Silence fasting, or *Mauna*, is a practice in Hinduism and Buddhism where individuals abstain from speaking for a certain period. This form of fasting is believed to calm the mind, enhance self-awareness, and foster inner peace (Tuli, 2018).

In Christianity, fasting varies across denominations but is often practiced during Lent, a 40-day period of preparation for Easter. Christians may abstain from food, certain types of food, or other indulgences, such as social media, as a form of spiritual discipline (Bynum, 2007). The Bible emphasizes fasting as a means to seek God's guidance, repentance, and personal reflection (Matthew 6:16-18).

Sexual abstinence as a form of fasting also exists in several traditions, particularly within Christian monastic practices and the ascetic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. This form of fasting is aimed at purifying one's desires and channeling energy into spiritual pursuits (Sharma, 2015).

The Philosophical and Therapeutic Role of Fasting

The core philosophy behind fasting in many traditions is the notion of self-discipline and purification. In Islam, fasting is not just limited to abstaining from food but also includes refraining from negative behaviors such as lying, backbiting, and obscene language. It is believed that fasting disciplines the *nafs* (self or ego), restoring it to its natural balance when it strays from ethical conduct (Ghazali, 2000).

Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali emphasize the importance of fasting as a means of spiritual treatment. For instance, a person who often lies or speaks unnecessarily may be advised to undertake silence fasting (*sawm al-sukut*) as a way to cleanse the soul from verbal impurities. Similarly, fasting from food is only advisable when the individual can afford it, as extreme poverty or deprivation would exacerbate their hardship rather than provide spiritual benefit. The purpose of fasting is to cultivate virtues such as patience, gratitude, and empathy (Al-Ghazali, 2000).

In a broader sense, fasting in different religious contexts serves as a therapeutic process. It functions as a cure for excessive indulgence, whether that be in physical pleasures, such as food and sex, or in harmful behaviors, such as excessive talking or overconsumption. For instance, someone who finds themselves indulging excessively in worldly pleasures may seek refuge in a spiritual retreat or center where fasting is practiced under the guidance of a spiritual teacher. These therapeutic fasts aim to restore balance to the mind, body, and soul (Rastogi, 2016).

Psychotherapy and the Role of Abstaining from Excessive Use of Substances or Habits

In psychotherapy, the practice of abstaining from the excessive use of substances or habits, such as alcohol, drugs, or compulsive behaviors like gambling, plays a central role in the treatment of various mental health disorders. Substance abuse and behavioral addictions can lead to profound emotional, psychological, and physical harm, disrupting an individual's capacity for self-regulation and contributing to conditions like anxiety, depression, and personality disorders. One therapeutic approach to addressing these challenges is the intentional practice of abstinence, integrated within psychotherapeutic interventions (Miller & Rollnick, 2012).

Abstinence, within the context of psychotherapy, involves the deliberate cessation or reduction of harmful substances or behaviors, allowing individuals to regain control over their lives. It is not solely about avoidance; rather, it serves as a foundation for deeper therapeutic work, addressing the root causes of addiction or compulsive behaviors. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Motivational Interviewing (MI) are frequently employed in this process, helping clients build the psychological resilience needed to resist the urges that lead to substance use or harmful habits (Beck, 2011).

CBT, for example, targets the cognitive distortions and automatic negative thoughts that often trigger substance use or unhealthy habits. By practicing abstinence, clients can begin to identify the underlying emotions or stressors that have been masked by their addictions, allowing them to develop healthier coping mechanisms (Beck, 2011). Abstinence provides the mental clarity necessary for patients to actively engage in this therapeutic reconditioning process.

Motivational Interviewing is another critical tool that helps individuals strengthen their commitment to change. This client-centered approach fosters a non-judgmental dialogue, enhancing the individual's intrinsic motivation to abstain from substances or compulsive behaviors (Miller & Rollnick, 2012). The therapeutic process focuses on reinforcing the client's autonomy while helping them recognize the personal costs of their addictive behavior, thereby strengthening their resolve to maintain abstinence.

Research has shown that prolonged abstinence, supported by psychotherapeutic interventions, can result in significant improvements in mental and physical health. For instance, a study by Witkiewitz and Marlatt (2004) demonstrated that individuals who maintain abstinence from substance use experience lower levels of stress, improved emotional regulation, and enhanced overall well-being. This is because abstaining from addictive behaviors provides individuals with the opportunity to rebuild their lives, focus on their personal goals, and engage in healthier relationships.

Challenges of Application of Alchemical Reforms: The Concept of BidAh

Bid'ah, an Arabic term meaning "innovation," refers to practices or beliefs introduced into Islam that deviate from the established teachings and traditions of the religion. In Islamic theology, bid'ah is often viewed with suspicion, as it represents an alteration or addition to the original teachings of Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community. This concept is grounded in the Hadith of the Prophet, where he is reported to have said, "Whoever introduces something into this matter of ours [Islam] that is not part of it, it is to be rejected" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 2014).

In Islamic jurisprudence, bid'ah is classified into two main categories: bid'ah hasanah (good innovation) and bid'ah sayyi'ah (bad innovation). Bid'ah hasanah refers to innovations that do not

contradict the core principles of Islam and may even serve to support the religion in a positive manner, such as the compilation of the Quran into a single book form after the death of Prophet Muhammad (al-Nawawi, 2013). On the other hand, bid'ah sayyi'ah includes practices that diverge from established religious doctrines and are seen as harmful to the faith, such as introducing new forms of worship not practiced by the Prophet or his companions (al-Shatibi, 2001).

The concept of bid'ah is not unique to Islam. Many other religious traditions also grapple with the issue of innovation and its impact on core doctrines and practices. In Christianity, for instance, there are debates about the legitimacy of new theological interpretations or liturgical practices that deviate from traditional teachings. The Protestant Reformation, led by figures such as Martin Luther, was in part a response to perceived innovations and corruptions within the Catholic Church, underscoring the tension between tradition and reform (MacCulloch, 2003).

Similarly, in Judaism, particularly within Rabbinic Judaism, there is a strong emphasis on adherence to the Torah and the Oral Law. Innovations that deviate from these foundational texts are often scrutinized to ensure they align with established Halakhic principles. The introduction of new customs or interpretations is typically approached with caution, as they must be evaluated against the longstanding traditions and legal frameworks (Elman, 2001).

In Buddhism, particularly in its various schools and traditions, the concept of innovation is viewed through the lens of maintaining the core teachings of the Buddha. While new practices or interpretations are generally accepted if they support the path to enlightenment, they are required to be consistent with the original teachings and practices established by the Buddha. Innovations that contradict the core principles of Buddhism or lead practitioners away from the path are generally rejected (Harvey, 2013).

In conclusion, the concept of bid'ah in Islam represents a broader issue faced by many religious traditions: the challenge of maintaining doctrinal purity while engaging with new interpretations or practices. In Islam, bid'ah is critically examined to ensure that innovations do not undermine the religion’s foundational teachings. Similarly, other religious traditions also grapple with balancing respect for established doctrines with the need for adaptation and reform. Each tradition addresses this balance in its own way, reflecting its unique historical and theological context.

Conclusion

Fasting, across different religious traditions, is more than a mere ritual; it is a powerful tool for spiritual and physical healing. In Islam, fasting during Ramadan is believed to purify both the soul and body, with therapeutic benefits recognized by both religious scholars and modern science. Other religious traditions incorporate various forms of fasting, such as silence or abstinence, to achieve similar goals of spiritual clarity and self-discipline. Ultimately, fasting is a practice that helps individuals restore balance within themselves, whether through spiritual purification, emotional control, or physical health. However the belief in a general form of fasting i.e. abstinence from food or sexual practices in the similar terms may not be conclusive or considered therapeutic for social-cultural disorder. Abstinence from excessive use of substances or compulsive behaviors which is considered a costume fasting in contrast to ideological fasting may play a vital role in social therapy. It creates the necessary space for individuals to explore and resolve the psychological and emotional factors contributing to their addictions. Through interventions such as CBT and MI, clients can build new coping strategies, enhance their self-awareness, and develop the resilience needed for long-term recovery and mental health stability. Application of new philosophical and transcendental teachings under Islamic Jurisprudence is usually difficult if not impossible and will face the consequences of bidáh. Therefore any changes are considered.

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